

Combined Action Program Solution for the Iraq Problem

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Submitted by Captain BH McClellan

to

Major GC Shreffler, III and Major RR Tatum, Jr., CG 15

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In both Vietnam and to a limited degree in Iraq, the Corps had tactical success with the Combined Action Program (CAP).<sup>1</sup> Despite this proven tactical success, the Corps failed to develop an in-depth plan to execute an extensive CAP in Iraq. With its past successes as a framework, the Corps must develop and execute a Combined Action Program to empower Iraqi local and national governments to provide security and stability.

#### The Evolution of the Combined Action Program

The Combined Action Program has its roots in the Banana Wars in Central America. U.S. Marines in Haiti, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic trained and assisted local police and military forces in stabilizing their countries. The Corps used these experiences to put together NAVMC 2890, *Small Wars Manual*. Major General M. P. Caulfield, former Deputy Commander for Warfighting, declared it "one of the best books on military peacekeeping and counterinsurgency operations published before World War II."<sup>2</sup> Marines have since used this manual as a foundation for their counterinsurgency actions.<sup>3</sup>

In Vietnam, Marines developed two distinct programs that utilized small units of Marines to fight the insurgency. The first was the medical civic action projects (MEDCAPs).

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<sup>1</sup> Philip C. Skuta, "Introduction to 2/7 CAP Platoon Actions in Iraq," *Marine Corps Gazette*, April 2005, 35.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Marine Corps, *Small Wars Manual*, 1940 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1991), Forward.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Danner, interview by Brent McClellan, September 27, 2005

The projects were not originally designed as a counterinsurgency effort. The MEDCAP was a squad of Marines escorted groups of Navy corpsmen to villages to conduct sick calls. The other counterinsurgency program was the Combined Action Program. In execution, a squad of volunteers from infantry battalions integrated with the militia platoons defending the villages. The Marines trained and lived with the local militia, effectively setting an example for them to follow and creating loyalty between them. Through the CAP, the Marines transformed these militias into respectable fighting forces.<sup>4</sup>

In 1999 LtGen Nguyen Dinh Uoc, "a former [North Vietnamese Army] division commander and then a professor at the Vietnam Military History Institute," visited Texas Tech University as part of a Vietnam War symposium. He was asked about Marines living in hamlets. LtGen Nguyen stated that the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong would only attack these hamlets when required to do so in order to accomplish a larger plan. He also stated that a Viet Cong informed him that Marines "had won the hearts of the people which is most important in a people's war. The larger American forces did not win the hearts of the people. Just the opposite, they destroyed their land.

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<sup>4</sup>. Terrence Maitland, *Contagion of War* (Newton, MA: Boston Publishing Co., 1983), 60-63.

If the Americans and government of Vietnam had won the hearts of the people, the war would have been more difficult for us."<sup>5</sup> The Combined Action Program was a successful counterinsurgency program in the Vietnam War and is the framework for combined action platoons sporadically used in Iraq.

#### Successful Use of the Combined Action Programs in Iraq

There has been limited execution of Combined Action Programs in Iraq. Third Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment (3/4) and 2d Battalion, 7th Marines (2/7) established combined action platoons in 2004. Although their composition and mission differed, both battalions succeeded in providing security and stability to their areas of responsibility and developing Iraqi forces.

The CAP from 3/4 was a more traditional CAP. The CAP consisted of one Marine officer, one corporal, fifteen lance corporals and below, and one Navy corpsman. They lived in the Haditha police station and trained the local Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). The Marines set the example for the Iraqis while developing Iraqi stability capability through patrolling and security operations in Haditha.

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<sup>5</sup>. James Donovan, "Marine Alternative to Search and Destroy," TheHistoryNet.com, <http://historynet.com/vn/blcap/index2.html>

The Marines patrolled the city and provided security at the police station with their Iraqi counterparts. When 3/4 left, Iraqi Security Forces performed their duties, and Haditha was a relatively secure area.<sup>6</sup>

The CAP from 2/7 trained the Iraqi National Guard (ING) 503d Battalion. They developed a training program that the ING could maintain after the CAP left. Third Platoon of Company G was tasked with the CAP. They deployed with the standard task organization of a platoon, including a platoon guide. Though their training program required significant logistic support, 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon trained seven hundred Iraqi soldiers in their initial training package. Third Platoon also instituted a train the trainer program to facilitate Iraqis assuming control of the training programs. By August 2004, the Iraqi trainers had complete control of the training program and were able to continue the program after 2/7 departed.<sup>7</sup>

#### Reasons for Success

From Vietnam to Iraq, there were reasons CAP succeeded. First and most significantly, the Marines trained the locals to provide for themselves. The training contributed to the Corps' success on several levels.

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<sup>6</sup>. Matthew Danner, interview by Brent McClellan, September 27, 2005

<sup>7</sup>. Jason Goodale and Jon Webre, "The Combined Action Platoon in Iraq," Marine Corps Gazette, April 2005, 40-42.

The locals knew that with this training they would one day be able to survive without Marine assistance. The training instilled the Iraqis with a sense of local pride, self-reliance, and self-respect. The training of locals also provided an economy of force for Marines. With trained and loyal allies providing security in less contested areas, Marines were able to concentrate power against more dedicated enemies. At tactical and operational levels, execution of the CAPs in Iraq, when used, have been highly successful. Until this point, administrative failure at the operational and strategic levels has mitigated this success.

The Marines gain the loyalty of the local civilians through the CAP.<sup>8</sup> With the security provided by the Marines and their local counterparts, the locals trusted and respected the Marines. The Marines achieved second and third order effects with the CAP. The corpsman that accompanied the Marines often administered medical assistance to the local population. Civil affairs projects came with the CAP, along with funding to improve local infrastructure that could not have otherwise been properly supervised. The Marines were accepted once they convinced the locals that the benefits of having Marines in their town outweighed the disadvantages.

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<sup>8</sup>. Marcus Corbin, "Revive Combined Action Platoons for Iraq," Defense News, October 11, 2004, 37.

These programs provided other advantages to the Corps. Marines gained human intelligence (HUMINT), the most valuable and accurate intelligence. The CAP spots the often-overlooked signals of insurgents and other useful intelligence. The HUMINT gained through the CAP could not be gained without significant dedication of specialized HUMINT or counter-intelligence teams.

### Failures in Today's CAP

The way in which Marines are rotated has changed between Vietnam and Iraq and has caused unforeseen complications with the execution of the CAP. In Vietnam, Marines were rotated individually. While individuals might periodically change within a CAP, the same CAP was maintained in a village throughout the execution of the program. Today, entire units are rotated. If the battalion commander decides to continue his predecessor's CAP, the Iraqis and Marines have to develop a new relationship every six months. This disruption can lead to significant inconsistencies as the quality of the CAP and the support it receives from higher command levels can vary greatly between units. This can cause the Iraqis to lose faith in the program.

Another complication that could further undermine the CAP even more is that battalion commanders are not always required to maintain a CAP.

When 3/4 left Haditha, the battalion that replaced them maintained the CAP for only a few months before abandoning the program. The CAP was withdrawn in order to provide additional forces to capture Falluja. Without the CAP to insure that the Iraqi government continued to pay the local police, funding for the police ceased. Most of the officers were forced to move to Baghdad to find jobs. With the police gone, insurgents moved into Haditha and began transforming a relative haven of order into another pool of chaos.<sup>9</sup> It was not the failure of the CAP that led to the downfall of Haditha; it was an Iraqi administrative failure to exploit success. If the Iraqi administration simply paid police officers who had proven their ability to provide security, Haditha would still be relatively secure today. Maintaining a CAP in Haditha would have ensured that the police continued to receive the support they needed. Inconsistency in the execution of the CAP failed the people of Haditha.

#### What Must be Done in Order to Make the CAP Successful

Consistency is what is most important to and most lacking in a successful Combined Action Program. The sporadic use of a CAP will not stabilize an area. It proves to the Iraqi people that the United States cannot commit to their security.

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<sup>9</sup>. Matthew Danner, interview by Brent McClellan, September 27, 2005

The Corps must institutionalize the Combined Action Program. Once a village is assigned a combined action platoon, one must be maintained there until the convening authority, at the MEF or higher level, determines that the village and its security forces are able to maintain security and stability in their area without the Marines. Only when this is established, will the CAP become truly effective.

The Corps must establish a formalized training for the CAP. During the Vietnam War, the Marines were given a two-week language and culture course before joining a combined action platoon in the field. The Corps is training Marines with Tactical Iraqi and other language and cultural classes, which is arguably the most important training they get before deploying to Iraq. This training, along with classes sent to the incoming CAP by the outgoing CAP on the culture and key players in the area, and how they interact. This level of understanding possessed by every Marine will insure consistency between the CAPs and set the incoming CAP up for success.

The quality of the Marines in the CAPs must also be consistent. The Marines must all be volunteers. None of the Marines can show a trend of disobedience, disrespect, or poor judgment. The Marines must show belief in the CAP and in the Iraqi people, or they will undermine the success of the unit.

The CAP does not need to strip the battalion of its best Marines, but the CAP does need to ensure its Marines are all of good moral character and are proficient infantry Marines. The Corps must ensure that the CAP Marines meet a set standard. This will assure the Iraqi people that they can have faith in the CAP no matter which unit is supplying the Marines.

Finally, the Iraqi government must be consistent. Although the Iraqi government is beyond the Corps' control, it is a factor that must be considered. If the Iraqi government fails to support ISFs, any success by the CAP will be destroyed once the Corps departs Iraq completely. The Corps can follow up on their success to ensure ISFs last while even the smallest Marine unit remains in Iraq. By following up with Iraqi forces that had worked with the CAP in the past, the Corps can apply pressure to the Iraqi government, through proper channels, to get the Iraqi forces the support they need. Following up with these ISFs will show the Iraqi forces that Marines are currently working with that they will still receive support from the Corps after the Corps leaves that area.

### Conclusion

The Combined Action Program is a viable solution to the insurgency problem in Iraqi. The program has worked in Vietnam and in its limited and sporadic use in Iraq. To achieve its desired results it requires systematic training, selection of personnel, and consistent execution in Iraq. The Combined Action Program will enable a transfer of responsibility of security and stability to the ISF.

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